

Message Text

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AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY LAGOS
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AMEMBASSY PARIS
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 DJIBOUTI 250/1

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TAGS: PBOR, PDIP, MOPS, DJ, ET, SO
SUBJ: DJIBOUTI'S RAILROAD A KEY ELEMENT AFFECTING PEACE IN
THE HORN OF AFRICA.
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REF: DIA P 180136Z FEB 78 NOTAL)

1. SUMMARY. ANY EVENTUAL PEACE SETTLEMENT BETWEEN ETHIOPIA
AND SOMALIA MUST DIRECTLY AND EXPLICITLY PERMIT THE NORMAL
FUNCTIONING OF THE DJIBOUTI-ADDIS ABABA RAILWAY (CFE).
EARLY MILITARY ACTIONS IN THE STILL-DEVELOPING ETHIOPIAN OFFENSIVE

INDICATE THAT THE DFE IS A PRIMARY STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE WHICH COULD BE LIBERATED WITHIN A FEW WEEKS OR EVEN DAYS. BOTH THE DJIBOUTIANS AND THE FRENCH REALIZE THAT THE PRICE OF PEACE WITH ETHIOPIA IS THE OPENING OF THE RAILWAY AT THE EARLIEST POSSIBLE DATE. HOWEVER, THE FIRST ISSUE TO BE FACED IS WHAT CAN BE DONE TO PREVENT THE SOMALI GOVERNMENT FROM FOSTERING SABOTAGE ON THE DELICATE RAILWAY WORKS WITHIN DJIBOUTI. SUCH A PROVOCATION WOULD ALMOST CERTAINLY STIMULATE FOREIGN INTERVENTION THAT COULD IN TURN LEAD TO A RENEWAL OF THE OGADEN WAR, THIS TIME IN DJIBOUTI PROPER. THIS REPORT REVIEWS THE COMPLEX FABRIC OF POLITICAL, MILITARY AND JURIDICAL ISSUES CONCERNING THE RAILWAY WHICH, IN MANY WAYS, WILL DETERMINE THE FUTURE RELATIONS BETWEEN ETHIOPIA AND SOMALIA, NOT TO SPEAK OF THE ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL VIABILITY OF DJIBOUTI. END SUMMARY.

2. BACKGROUND. STUDENTS OF THE HORN HAVE LONG ACCEPTED THE BASIC TRUISM THAT DJIBOUTI CITY IS ESSENTIALLY AN ETHIOPIAN TOWN WITH A SOMALI POPULATION. THE TOWN'S EXISTENCE WAS ORIGINALLY PREDICATED ON THE ABILITY OF THE FRENCH TO MONOPOLIZE ETHIOPIA'S EXPORT TRADE, A SITUATION WHICH EXISTED FROM THE OPENING OF THE FINAL SECTION OF THE CHEMIN DE FER ETHIOPIEN (CFE), IN 1917, UNTIL THE YUGOSLAVS BUILT THE PORT OF ASSAB FOR THE ETHIOPIANS IN THE MID-1950'S. DESPITE THE AVAILABILITY OF ASSAB, THE ECONOMIES OF RAIL TRANSPORT FOR BULK CARGOS FROM DJIBOUTI VERSUS ROAD TRANSPORT FROM ASSAB ARE SUCH THAT DJIBOUTI REMAINS THE KEY LIFELINE BETWEEN THE POPULATION CENTERS OF SOUTHERN ETHIOPIA, CONFIDENTIAL

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PARTICULARLY ADDIS ABABA, AND THE WORLD. ONLY THE COSTLY SOVIET AIRLIFT RELIEVED THE BOTTLENECK CREATED BY THE CLOSURE OF THE RAILWAY. THE ESSENTIALLY SOMALI POPULATION OF THE TOWN OF DJIBOUTI IS A PHENOMENON AS RECENT AS THE RAILWAY IN HISTORICAL TERMS. UNTIL THE RAILWAY'S ADVENT, THE PRIMARY MEANS OF ACCESS TO CHOA (SOUTHERN ETHIOPIA) WAS THROUGH THE ANCIENT SOMALI PORT OF ZEILA. WITH THE RAILWAY, THE SOMALI MERCHANTS AND WORKERS OF THAT CITY MOVED NORTH TOWARD DJIBOUTI, SEALING THE FATE OF ZEILA, ASSURING FRENCH SUPREMACY OVER THE BRITISH, THE ITALIANS AND OTHERS SEARCHING FOR ACCESS TO THE CHRISTIAN EMPIRE, AND EXACERBATING THE AGE-OLD RIVALRY BETWEEN THE SOMALI TRIBES AND THE AFARS, WHO ORIGINALLY POPULATED THE REGION NORTH OF ZEILA. THE STORY OF THE RAILWAY, FOR ALL PRACTICAL PURPOSES, IS THE HISTORY OF DJIBOUTI.

3. THE RAILWAY, THE OGADEN WAR AND DJIBOUTI STABILITY. IT IS TOO SOON TO RECORD THE HISTORY OF THE OGADEN WAR. HOWEVER, IT CAN BE SAID THAT THE OPENING SHOTS OF THAT WAR TOOK PLACE WHEN SOMALI SAPPERS ATTACKED CERTAIN KEY BRIDGES ON THE DJIBOUTI--ADDIS ABABA RAILWAY, ON THE ETHIOPIAN RIGHT-OF-WAY. FOLLOWING THE CLOSURE OF THE STRATEGIC RAILWAY BY THESE INCIDENTS ON JUNE 1, 1977, THE MOGADISCIO REGIME WAS CERTAIN THAT IT HAD

CUT THE MOST IMPORTANT SINGLE LOGISTICAL LIFELINE WHICH AFFECTED ETHIOPIA'S ABILITY TO REACT TO THEIR ATTACKS. IN THE ZONE SUBSEQUENTLY CONTROLLED BY SOMALIA, WHICH INCLUDED ALL OF THE RAILWAY FROM THE DJIBOUTI FRONTIER AT DUENELE TO MELLO, SOME 36 MILES FROM DIRE DAWA. A TRAIN WAS ISOLATED AND ABANDONED BY THE EXPLOSIONS OF JUNE 1, AND ONCE CERTAIN JERRY-BUILT REPAIRS WERE MADE ON THE BRIDGES IN THE SOMALI-HELD ZONE, THE RAILWAY WAS USED BY THE SOMALIS TO TRANSPORT WATER, MEDICINES, FOOD AND OTHER ESSENTIAL SUPPLIES WHICH WERE LARGELY PURCHASED FROM SOMALI FACTORS IN DJIBOUTI. IT SEEMS FAIRLY CERTAIN THAT SOME TRAINS WERE ACTUALLY SET UP WITHIN DJIBOUTI, WITH THE TACIT ACCEPTANCE OF THE DJIBOUTI GOVERNMENT, AND WERE SENT UP TO THE BATTLE ZONE TO SUPPORT THE SOMALI WAR EFFORT. THIS SUPPORT FOR SOMALIA ON THE RAILWAY DID NOT ESCAPE THE NOTICE OF THE ETHIOPIANS.

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4. THE RAILWAY AND RELATIONS WITH NEIGHBORS. THE PRONOUNCED OFFICIAL "TILT" IN DJIBOUTI'S PROCLAIMED NEUTRALITY IN FAVOR OF SOMALIA DURING ALL THE MONTHS OF THE WAR UNTIL RECENT DAYS WAS ONE OF THE ROOT CAUSES OF THE ETHNIC VIOLENCE WHICH ALL BUT SHATTERED DJIBOUTI'S FRAGILE POLITICAL AND GOVERNMENTAL INSTITUTIONS IN THE FINAL MONTHS OF 1977. THE SOMALIS IN DJIBOUTI'S POPULATION, FROM THE PRESIDENT ON DOWN, CANNOT UNDERSTAND WHY ANYONE WOULD OPPOSE THE EFFORTS OF THE SOMALIS IN THE OGADEN TO SECURE FREEDOM FROM THE ETHIOPIANS. THE AFARS, ON THE OTHER HAND, SEE ANY EFFORT WHICH INCREASES SOMALI INFLUENCE IN DJIBOUTI, INCLUDING THE WELCOME GIVEN THE LARGE NUMBERS OF ETHNIC SOMALI REFUGEES FROM THE RAIL LINE IN DJIBOUTI, AS A DIRECT THREAT TO THEIR CONTINUED EXISTENCE AS AN ETHNIC GROUP. PROMINENT AFARS, INCLUDING FORMER PRIME MINISTER DINI AND THE PRESENT PRIME MINISTER ABDALLAH KAMIL, AND OTHERS, DO NOT UNDERSTAND WHY THE DJIBOUTI GOVERNMENT SHOULD DO ANYTHING TO THREATEN THE ESSENTIAL ECONOMIC TIES WITH ETHIOPIA IN THE NAME OF CHIMERICAL PAN-SOMALISM.

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AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY ROME

AMEMBASSY SANA

AMEMBASSY TEHRAN

USMISSION USUN NY

USMISSION NATO

CINCUSNAVEUR

USDAO PARIS

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 DJIBOUTI 250/2

5. SECURITY ISSUES. CONVERSATIONS WITH THE PRESIDENT, THE PRIME MINISTER AND KNOWN ISSA "HARDLINERS/ IN RECENT DAYS INDICATES VIRTUAL UNANIMITY AT THE OFFICIAL LEVEL IN DJIBOUTI ABOUT THE NEED TO REOPEN THE RAILWAY TO ETHIOPIA JUST AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. CONFIDENTIAL

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THERE IS CONSIDERABLE FEAR AT ALL LEVELS THAT SOMALIA WILL ATTEMPT TO CLOSE THE RAILWAY, THIS TIME WITH SABOTAGE INSIDE DJIBOUTI TERRITORY. ALTHOUGH ONLY 70 MILES OF THE 609 MILE RAILWAY ACTUALLY CROSSES DJIBOUTI TERRITORY, THERE ARE SEVERAL PLACES WHERE SABOTAGE COULD CRIPPLE THE RAILWAY FOR A PERIOD UP TO ONE YEAR. THE TWO MOST SUSCEPTIBLE POINTS IN DJIBOUTI REPUBLIC ARE THE BRIDGES AT CHABELE (27 FEET WIDE, BY 50 FEET, 55 FEET HIGH) 12 MILES FROM DJIBOUTI AND OVER THE RAVINE AT HOLL-HOLL (AFAR WORD FOR BRIDGE), SOME 35 MILES FROM DJIBOUTI. THIS 25 FOOT WIDE BY 50 FOOT BRIDGE (70 FEET HIGH) IS A MASTERPIECE OF VICTORIAN-ERA STEEL LACEWORK. EXPERTS STATE THAT A FEW STICKS OF WELL-PLACED DYNAMITE WOULD CAUSE THIS BRIDGE TO CRUMPLE LIKE A WEDDING CAKE. A COMPANY OF FOREIGN LEGIONAIRES BASED AT HOLL-HOLL NOW MAINTAINS THE SECURITY OF THIS KEY STRUCTURE, UNDER AN ARRANGEMENT MADE AT

INDEPENDENCE TIME. HOWEVER, THIS AGREEMENT ENDS ON MARCH 1, 1978, FRENCH AMBASSADOR BASTOUIL TOLD THE CHARGE RECENTLY THAT HE PLANS TO LET THE DEFENSE ARRANGEMENT ON THE HOLL-HOLL BRIDGE LAPSE AND LET THE DJIBOUTIANS TAKE OVER PROTECTION OF THE BRIDGE. HOWEVER, HE SAID THAT A REQUEST FROM THE DJIBOUTIANS FOR ASSISTANCE WOULD PROBABLY BE ACCEPTED. PROTECTION OF THE HOLL-HOLL BRIDGE BY DJIBOUTI TROOPS, ACCORDING TO FRENCH ADVISORS, WOULD REQUIRE THE COMMITMENT OF A FULL BATTALION.

6. DIPLOMATIC APPROACH NECESSARY. IN THE OPINION OF AMBASSADOR BASTOUIL, THE ONLY WAY TO ASSURE THE SECURITY OF THE DJIBOUTI RIGHT-OF-WAY IS TO MAKE A DIRECT APPROACH TO MOGADISCIO. THE POST BELIEVES THAT HE HAS ALREADY SIGNED PARIS ABOUT THE NEED TO MAKE SUCH AN APPROACH. IT WOULD BE IN THE INTEREST OF THE UNITED STATES, AS WELL AS THE OTHER STATES INTERESTED IN BRINGING PEACE TO THE HORN, TO MAKE IT CLEAR TO MOGADISCIO AND ITS ARAB STATE SYMPATHIZERS THAT NO MISCHIEF ON THE RAILWAY WILL BE TOLERATED. SUCH A DEMARCHE SHOULD BE MADE SOON AND NOT BE FORCED TO WAIT FOR AN EVENTUAL PEACE SETTLEMENT.

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7. THE LEGAL ISSUES. THERE IS ONE LAST MATTER AFFECTING THE RAILWAY WHICH COULD AFFECT THE REOPENING OF RAIL SERVICES, QUITE APART FROM THE POLITICAL AND SECURITY ISSUES. THE PRESENT RAILWAY COMPANY WAS SET UP AS A JOINT VENTURE BY THE GOVERNMENTS OF FRANCE AND ETHIOPIA IN 1959. EACH SIDE MAINTAINS 50 PERCENT OF THE SHARES OF THE COMPANY. THE FRENCH SHARES ARE HELD APPROXIMATELY 29 PERCENT BY THE FRENCH STATE AND THE APPROXIMATE 21 PERCENT REMAINDER IS HELD BY PRIVATE INVESTORS. AT THE INDEPENDENCE OF DJIBOUTI, THE FRENCH GOVERNMENT OFFERED ITS OFFICIAL SHARES TO THE NEWLY-INDEPENDENT GOVERNMENT. THE DJIBOUTIANS REFUSED TO ACCEPT THEM, CLAIMING THAT THE DOLLAR 14 MILLION INDEBTEDNESS OF THE COMPANY AND ITS OBLIGATIONS FOR PENSIONS AND OTHER MATTERS, ARE A VERY UNATTRACTIVE GIFT. THE DJIBOUTIANS HAVE INSISTED THAT THE FRENCH (AND THE ETHIOPIANS) PAY OFF THE INDEBTEDNESS AND FIND A SOLUTION FOR THE PENSION PROBLEM, WHICH INCLUDES RESPONSIBILITY FOR ABOUT 350 RETIRED FRENCH CITIZENS, AND SEVERAL HUNDRED DJIBOUTIANS. THEY DEMAND THAT THE 1959 AGREEMENT, WHICH, WITH SOME JUSTICE, THEY BELIEVE TO BE TOO FAVORABLE FOR THE ETHIOPIANS, BE RENEGOTIATED. IN THE MEANTIME, THE ETHIOPIAN GOVERNMENT DECIDED IN MARCH 1977 TO RENOUNCE ANY FURTHER OBLIGATION TO PAY THE PENSIONS FOR NON-ETHIOPIAN RETIREES.

8. PARIS NOT PLEASED BY PROSPECTS OF FURTHER CONSULTATIONS. THE RESULT OF THESE MATTERS, WHICH HAVE GONE UNRESOLVED THROUGH SEVERAL FRUITLESS MEETINGS OF THE FRENCH, DJIBOUTIANS AND ETHIOPIANS SINCE INDEPENDENCE, IS A JURIDICAL NIGHTMARE. THE FRENCH MAINTAIN THAT THEY ARE NO LONGER DIRECTLY CONCERNED SINCE THEY HAVE GIVEN UP THEIR OFFICIAL SHARES. THE

DJIBOUTIANS REFUSE TO ACCEPT THE GIFT AND SAY THAT IT IS A FRENCH PROBLEM. THE ETHIOPIANS LOOK UPON THE AFFAIR AS SOME KIND OF GALLO-SOMALI, CAPITALIST, PLOT TO DEPRIVE THEM OF THEIR RAILWAY. FRENCH INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR OVERSEAS TERRITORIES ROBERT HAS MADE SEVERAL VISITS TO DJIBOUTI SINCE INDEPENDENCE, MOSTLY TO DEAL WITH THIS RESIDUAL PROBLEM AFFECTING HIS MINISTRY. PROPERLY GOADED ON THIS ISSUE, HE CAN BECOME APOPLICTIC

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ABOUT THE RAILWAY. ROBERT HAS LONG FELT THAT THE FRENCH SHOULD CUT THEIR LOSSES AND LEAVE DJIBOUTI UP FOR GRABS. NEVERTHELESS, HE IS THE BEST INFORMED INDIVIDUAL IN THE FRENCH GOVERNMENT ON THE JURIDICAL PROBLEMS OF THE RAILWAY, AND WOULD BE A USEFUL CONTACT FOR OUR EMBASSY IN PARIS TO CONSULT ON HE MATTER.

9. THE OPTIONS. THERE ARE THREE SOLUTIONS OPEN: CONTINUATION OF THE PRESENT COMPANY, DEVELOPMENT OF A NEW JOINT DJIBOUTI-ETHIOPIAN COMPANY(THERE ARE SPECIAL PROBLEMS ON HOW TO OBTAIN THE FRENCH SHARES HELD BY PRIVATE CITIZENS) OR TO CREATE TWO SEPARATE COMPANIES, EACH MAINTAINING ITS OWN RAILWAY LINE AND TIED TO EACH OTHER THROUGH FIXED CHARGES. NONE OF THESE SOLUTIONS IS PERFECT: EVEN THE DISSOLUTION OF THE PRESENT COMPANY IS COMPLICATED BY THE FACT THAT ALL OF THE COMPANY RECORDS ARE NOW IN ADDIS ABABA UNDER THE 1959 AGREEMENT AND THAT APPROXIMATELY 75 PERCENT OF THE RAILWAY PATRIMONY IS IN ETHIOPIAN TERRITORY. THE OPINION OF THE FRENCH AMBASSADOR, THE SOLUTION MOST LIKELY TO RESULT IS THE CREATION OF TWO SEPARATE COMPANIES, EACH WITH ITS OWN RESPONSIBILITIES. THIS WOULD CONSIDERABLY LOWER MAINTENANCE COSTS FOR DJIBOUTI AND WOULD MAKE THEM FEEL THAT THEIR SOVEREIGNTY WAS APPEASED. A RECENT CONVERSATION WITH PRIME MINISTER KAMIL INDICATED TO THE CHARGE THAT HIS NEW GOVERNMENT COULD BE EXPECTED TO BE MORE HELPFUL IN FUTURE NEGOTIATIONS ON THE RAILWAY.

10. COMMENT. THE DJIBOUTI-ADDIS ABABA RAILWAY IS ONE OF THE KEY ISSUES AFFECTING THE WAR IN THE OGADEN. AS PLANNING FOR PEACE CONTINUES, IT MAY BE THE KEY MATTER INSURING POLITICAL STABILITY TO THIS REGION.

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